

THE REMNANT THEOLOGY OF MARTIN LUTHER

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Introduction

The German Reformation began on 31 October 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the door of the castle church of Wittenberg, Germany.¹ Luther's placement in church history and his contribution to Christian theology cannot be ignored. There seems to be a general consensus that Luther's idea of righteousness by faith alone was perhaps his "greatest contribution" to Christianity.² He also associated remnant theology with this concept of justification by faith.

At the outset, it must be pointed out that to analyze Luther's remnant theology is not easy, but rather, a difficult task. This is due to his personality as a writer and theologian and his characteristics or style in presenting his ideas or views of the Christian faith. He expressed the truth of the Christian faith vigorously in form of powerful paradoxes or opposites, strange complexes, apparent contradictions, exaggeration even inconsistencies at times. He dwells on theological conflicts or debate as an "outspoken activist."³ This is clear in the way he used the word "alone," or "only." Such phrases as the "remnant only is saved," or the "church alone"⁴ are seen to be in tension.

As a lecturer and Bible translator, Luther was familiar with the biblical notion of the remnant as may be noted in some of his comments: "God always remains the Redeemer, who preserves the remnant of the seed of Abraham and Zion."⁵ Indeed, the Lord preserves the remnant "alone to Himself as a seed for

¹This date is still debated. Some historians claim that the event occurred either in 1514 or 1518, while others contend for 1519 or 1520. For a summary of the discussion see Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction of His Life and Work*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 149-50.

²William M. Landeen, *Martin Luther's Religious Thought* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1971), 139.

³In connection with these observations, see Landeen, v, 52; Siegbert W. Becker, *The Foolishness of God* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern, 1982), 1; Jerry K. Robbins, ed., *The Essential Luther* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 9, 10.

⁴See Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman, ed., *Luther's Works*, 54 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia/Fortress, 1956-1986), 11:42, 356; 51:166-68, 304-05; cf. 25:85, 96, 395. Cited hereafter as LW.

⁵LW, 17:307.

another people.”⁶ This preservation of the remnant is by the “election of God’s grace” and “not by their own will.”⁷ However, his ideas on this subject are not systematically treated but are scattered in his lectures on various books of the Bible.⁸ However, most scholars, even Lutheran, overlook these ideas on remnant theology and make only scanty references to Luther when dealing with this issue.⁹

Luther’s Description of the Remnant

Luther described the remnant as “a root” or the “kernel”¹⁰ of a seed. As such, he was certain that the remnant numbered “just a few,”¹¹ a mere “part,”¹² or a “very small part,”¹³ even “the lesser part”¹⁴ of the people whom God Himself had preserved. Indeed, “God smites His people, yet He does it in such a way that the heathen may not say, ‘Where is their God?’ Still He saves only the tiniest remnant of His people.”¹⁵ As the “few who remained” on the Lord’s side, they constituted the “best part of the people.”¹⁶ As the “few” or “chosen,” they were the “little ones” who had accepted Jesus’ teachings.¹⁷ God’s assurance is that in spite of the fall of many, “I shall still save My remnant—My little ones—for Myself.”¹⁸ In terms of their attitude and response to God’s service, they were the “only very few devout”

⁶LW, 25:396.

⁷Ibid., 423.

⁸Luther’s lectures on Psalms (1513-15), the Minor Prophets (1524-27) and Isaiah (1527, 1530), provide a hint of his initial views concerning the remnant. His full understanding of the concept seems to have occurred in his lectures on Romans (1515-17) where he discovered the great theme of righteousness by faith.

⁹See Heinrich Borkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Victor I. Gruhn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 70, 78; Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 290, 343.

¹⁰LW, 20:211 on Zech 3:2.

¹¹LW, 25:85.

¹²LW, 18:51 on Hos 9:11-13.

¹³LW, 18:154

¹⁴LW, 20:150. According to C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary*, reprint (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 243, the preservation of the remnant “is a miracle of divine grace.”

¹⁵LW, 18:101.

¹⁶LW, 18:149, 177. Ralph Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 32 (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 29, comments insightfully, “The remnant is identified with the afflicted, poor, and lame (4:6-7), but it stresses the power of the remnant (5:6-7), forgiven and cleansed.”

¹⁷LW, 20:335. The “few” (Matt 7:4; Luke 13:32), the “little ones” (Luke 17:2), and the “chosen” (Matt 20:14-16) point “to the remnant of faith of Jesus’ teachings.” See Kenneth D. Mulzac, “Remnant,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1117-1118.

¹⁸LW, 2:150.

and “faithful”¹⁹ people to their God. Even though they were an “insignificant remnant”²⁰ or just a “bare remnant”²¹ compared to the majority, they were the “people who will hope in the name of the Lord.”²² Therefore, they were the “elect,” the ones “chosen from eternity.”²³

Luther also employed metaphorical expressions similar to those used by Bible writers to describe the remnant. For instance, they were the “seed of God,”²⁴ a “bone of a lamb snatched from a lion’s mouth or a brand from a fire,”²⁵ the “remaining ember,”²⁶ or a “glimmering spark—which would sweep the whole world.”²⁷ As a “tent peg,”²⁸ where God hangs many beautiful vessels and ornaments, the remnant are faithful people converted by the Gospel. Accordingly, Paul was an “outstanding peg” and Timothy, Titus, Apollos, Peter and others were among the vessels.²⁹ Above all, the “elect” and the “remnant” are the same people “chosen from eternity.”³⁰

Luther’s description of the remnant indicates that, overall, he saw the remnant in a positive way. Regardless of their smallness or seeming insignificance they were God’s special people and this implies a positive quality.

Characteristics of the Remnant

Luther’s idea of justification by faith is not to be divorced from his notion of the remnant. He associated the remnant with those who are “justified” or “live by faith.”³¹ They are God’s remnant people precisely because they “trusted in Him as

¹⁹LW, 18:341. Cf. Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 3:33, 34, who also describe the remnant as “pious, righteous, and faithful.”

²⁰LW, 18:282.

²¹LW, 20:66, 148.

²²LW, 18:358. The “poor and needy” in Jesus’ teaching corresponds to the remnant idea. See Gerhard F. Hasel, “Remnant,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, completely rev. and reset, ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (1979-88), 4:130-34.

²³LW, 17:344; 18:276.

²⁴LW, 20:210; 17:406.

²⁵LW, 18:154, 158.

²⁶LW, 20:211.

²⁷Ibid., 82.

²⁸Ibid., 109.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰LW, 17:344; 18:276.

³¹LW, 17:305, 307; 25:85, 97. Cf. Hans K. LaRondelle, “The Remnant and the Three Angels’ Messages,” *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. George W. Reid (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 862, who points out that “the spiritual characteristics of the faithful remnant are faith, trust, and willing obedience. . . .”

their God.”³² Because of the quality of their faith, this people “will be holy and righteous”³³ and will become the “saints” of God.³⁴

Moreover, the righteous remnant “firmly remain with the pure Word and are refined and tested by both persecution and affliction.”³⁵ Indeed, a “tiny remnant which has been saved knows the sweetness of the Gospel. Therefore they accepted it and believed it.”³⁶

According to Luther, the remnant is also characterized by their obedience to God. They are loyal to the commandments of God. In admonishing the faithful not to violate the precepts in the Decalogue, he said:

This is what the persecutors are after, that the faithful forsake God’s commandments and receive theirs. Yet the church, even if she is diminished and almost swallowed up, does not forsake them . . . the remnant of the churches preserves and keep them.³⁷

In fact, Luther insisted on obedience to God’s laws:

God threatens to punish all who transgress these commandments. We should therefore fear his wrath and not disobey these commandments. On the other hand, He promises grace and every blessing to all who keep them. We should therefore love Him, trust in Him, and cheerfully do what He has commanded.³⁸

For Luther, there was a direct relationship between blessings and obedience to God’s commandments. For this reason he urged that the remnant preserve and keep the articles of the Decalogue.

Preservation of the Remnant

According to some scholars, the remnant refers to survivors of natural disasters like a flood or famine, calamities stemming from human machinations

³²LW, 16:221. Cf. David Latoundji, “Yeter,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:573-74, who says that those “who live by faith constitute the true remnant.”

³³Ibid.

³⁴LW, 17:381 on Isa 65:8.

³⁵LW, 20:336 on Zech 13:8-9.

³⁶Ibid., 123.

³⁷LW, 11:476.

³⁸Timothy F. Lull, *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 479.

such as war and tribal conflict, and divine judgment.³⁹ This is not unique to them. Luther had the same idea. For example, in commenting on God's punitive actions against the antediluvian world, he said,

And when He destroys something, He still leaves a remnant and keeps a seed through which He will restore again. Thus He had the world, together with its men and animals, destroyed through the Flood and restored it again⁴⁰

Three things are implied in this statement: (1) the life-and-death problem or the threat of extinction of life, (2) survival of a divine catastrophe (since Noah and his family survived the Flood and constituted a remnant), and (3) immediate and future restoration.⁴¹ The same idea may be found in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, where Luther asserts that since Lot survived the divine catastrophe he was left as a remnant.⁴² This is equally true of Joseph who was sold to Egypt as a slave but God reversed this sentence and made him the preserver of life (Gen 45:5,7). Luther claims that owing to this, sometimes the "church is called Joseph."⁴³

In his exposition of Amos 3:12, Luther indicates that despite the fact that mortal threats are made against the people of God, His preserving power must be kept in focus.

He treats His people as if He were completely incapable of protecting them. He permits them to be swallowed up almost totally. Yet He *preserves a very few and protects them* in such a way that absolutely no power either of the world or of the devil is so great as to be superior to those few.⁴⁴

God's Mission for the Remnant

For Luther, the preservation of the remnant was associated with God's mission or purpose in saving them. This is due to the fact that God accomplishes His will through the remnant. Because of his future-oriented view of the remnant⁴⁵

³⁹See for instance V. Hertrich, "*Leimma ktl.*," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 4:196-209.

⁴⁰LW, 20:210, comments on Zech 3:2.

⁴¹God told Noah and his family to be fruitful and multiply in the earth (Gen 9:1), just as He had commanded Adam and Eve. Hence, what Gen 9 is saying is that this is a new creation. See Kenneth D. Mulzac, "Genesis 9:1-7: Its Theological Connections with the Creation Motif," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 12/1 (2001): 65-77.

⁴²LW, 17:381; 20:210.

⁴³LW, 11:95.

⁴⁴LW, 20:37 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁵This prospective picture is shared by others. See Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah*, Andrews University Monograph Studies in Religion, vol. 5 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press,

(as seen in his references to Noah, Lot, and Joseph), Luther argued that God preserved them “in order that there might be some in whom the new kingdom might begin.”⁴⁶ He espoused this view repeatedly. As far as he was concerned, God directed the remnant “toward the world and led to the converting of the nations.”⁴⁷ It was “from that cornerstone which I saved (that) I shall build Myself a new house, the church.”⁴⁸ Therefore, the mission of the remnant is clearly evangelistic. Indeed, the remnant may be described as a “fit vessel for honor, because it will go for the Lord, that is, it will be His instrument for teaching others, hearing, and breaking through, even with danger.”⁴⁹ Again,

From that tiny remnant I shall raise up for Myself a numberless people. From an insignificant spark I shall kindle a great fire. They will be My sowers of peace, that is, they will be well and prosperous. They will multiply like seed.⁵⁰

It was from such a seed that those who survived the Babylonian captivity became the nucleus of the new community. Indeed, the “Lord might kindle a fire from a tiny remnant—as from a glimmering spark—which would sweep the whole world. For this purpose, some were saved for the sake of the promises.”⁵¹ However, this did not occur naturally. It was God’s doing and His sovereignty is underscored in that He preserved the remnant “alone to Himself as a seed for another people.”⁵²

For Luther, the remnant embraced an ecclesiastical dimension. He argued that God raised “the remnant, that the kingdom of Judah should not be [totally] destroyed until Christ would come.”⁵³ In this light, the remnant is

1974), 247; idem, “Semantic Values of Derivatives of the Hebrew Root *Š’R*,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 11 (1973): 163-65; idem, “The Alleged ‘No’ of Amos and Amos’ Eschatology,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 29 (1991): 11-18; Elmer A. Martens, “Remnant,” *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*, ed Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 669-71.

⁴⁶LW, 18:207.

⁴⁷LW, 11:95; 18:194, 342.

⁴⁸LW, 20:109. Cf. Gerhard F. Hasel, *Understanding the Book of Amos: Basic Issues in Current Interpretations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 114.

⁴⁹LW, 16:77. For Luther the salvation of the remnant people of God is linked to the preaching of the Gospel. Cf. LW, 20:93 on Zech 8:7.

⁵⁰LW, 20:85.

⁵¹Ibid., 82. For this reason, Merrill F. Unger, *Zechariah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 137, claims that there is “still a future remnant in the last days.”

⁵²LW, 25:396.

⁵³LW, 16:85. In connection with this idea it may be noted that God designated the remnant as the “group to whom he purposed to send the Messiah.” Siegfried H. Horn, ed. *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1979), s.v. “Remnant.”

like a little branch from the forest, finally growing and filling the earth—this is the church, the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit—in which there is no ungodly person and sinner, but all are righteous through Christ.⁵⁴

For Luther, the remnant that had “been preserved by God to be a seed”⁵⁵ pointed to the Church. According to Paul Althaus, Luther in some sense “related the prophecies about the holy seed and the remnant to future Christians.”⁵⁶ This “holy seed”⁵⁷ will be the “spiritual remnant,” “men born of God.”⁵⁸ It is from them that a “new people will grow.”⁵⁹

The Contemporary Remnant

Commenting on Rom 11:5, Luther claimed that just as there was a remnant in Bible times, so “also today a remnant exists and can be found according to the election of grace.”⁶⁰ Protestant believers who survived bloody persecution were described using language reminiscent of the remnant:

So today destruction looms up for the church under the pope and everywhere. . . . Many people will nevertheless be *preserved* . . . (and) a very *small part* is saved. . . . So our papists boast of their number, their traditional right . . . (so) we must answer them: “God is truthful. Those who believe in Him are the church and the godly, even though they are the *least and the fewest*.”⁶¹

Those who remained firm and loyal in their Protestant faith despite terrible suffering were the surviving remnant. Further, Luther comforted his followers to “not lose heart” or “look at the great destruction” of the persecuted ones, but to

⁵⁴LW, 16:76.

⁵⁵LW, 20:150.

⁵⁶Althaus, 215, n. 256.

⁵⁷According to Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea From Genesis to Isaiah*, 247, the holy seed “is holy only after the cleansing experience brought about by confrontation with the divine holiness analogous to the confrontation and cleansing experience of Isaiah. After the annihilation of the nation a holy people will sprout out of the remaining stock. It will be holy, for it has experienced cleansing judgment.”

⁵⁸LW, 16:75, 76.

⁵⁹LW, 17:381. Cf. Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle of Romans*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 328.

⁶⁰LW, 25:423. Cf. Brendon Byrne, *Romans*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 6 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 305, who concurs with Luther that the remnant “is the one that has come about on the basis of an election preceding from grace.”

⁶¹LW, 16:136.

look at the “little root” or “little remnant.”⁶² God will preserve them. For “His own name’s sake . . . He preserves the remnant. It will be like this in our time. God protects us not because of our merits but because of His name.”⁶³ In fact, Luther likened the remnant of his time to that of Amos’ time (4:10-12).⁶⁴ He claimed that “one single brand, kindled and taken from the fire must not be compared with the burning of the entire people.”⁶⁵ Indeed, God “always leaves us some hope, lest we utterly lose hope. He snatches us away like a brand from the fire.”⁶⁶ The implication is that for Luther, those who accepted the Protestant Reformation were actually the remnant.

Luther also believed that there were even some among the papists who were the remnant. In this light, he commented, “Yet among them there are remnants, and for their sakes, for those good people, I will speak, even though a number of reasons should dictate silence.”⁶⁷ He saw himself like Jeremiah (4:19) who was not able to hold peace. But for the “elect’s sake, I will not rest, I will continue to preach.”⁶⁸

The Remnant and the Church

Before Luther’s final separation from the Roman Church, and in fact, before 1517, he was already promoting a new understanding of the church as seen in his lectures on Psalms (1513-15).⁶⁹ He did not like the term “church” (*kirche*), but preferred “congregation” and “assembly” of the saints in the sense of the interaction of people who are living members of the body of Christ.

The communion of the saints is both the hidden community (1 Cor 2:7-15) and the visible fellowship. The church is hidden because faith is the “conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). “It is never realized on earth in either its universal or its congregational extension, since God has reserved the complete realization of

⁶²LW, 16:326. When God’s remnant suffer persecution or affliction, they oftentimes receive special care from Him. See Lester V. Meyer, “Remnant,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 5:670.

⁶³LW, 17:307.

⁶⁴Hasel, *Understanding the Book of Amos*, 114, notes that in “Amos the remnant motif is used for the first time in an eschatological sense.”

⁶⁵LW, 18:154. According to Byrne, 331, this hope stems from divine grace. He says, “It is not a ‘faithful remnant’ if by ‘faithful’ some human quality or value is in view. The ‘faithfulness’ attached to this remnant is the faithfulness of the God of grace.”

⁶⁶LW, 18:154.

⁶⁷LW, 17:344.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹In the 1519 Leipzig Debate, Luther pointed out that the Roman Church had already fallen and was no longer the true church of God. See Eric W. Gricth, *Introduction to the Ministry*, in LW, 39: xv.

faith to the Last Day.”⁷⁰ The church is also hidden because of its inherent nature. “Therefore it is not fully revealed, just as God was not fully disclosed even on the cross of Jesus, and has remained a hidden God.”⁷¹ Luther distinguished between *Deus Absconditus*, “the hidden God,” and *Dues Revelatus*, “the revealed God,” in his understanding of the church. The true church was constituted of the hidden community of the saints, the people of God living according to the Word of God.⁷² This true and hidden church is ruled by Christ’s Spirit.⁷³ Even in the Roman Church “some were called the people and saints of God who were not, while others, who were among them as the remnant, were the people and saints of God.”⁷⁴ This “assembly of the saints” is pious and “is gathered, preserved and ruled by the Holy Ghost.”⁷⁵ According to Luther, “where the Word is, there is faith, where there is faith, there is a church.”⁷⁶ To be certain, “where God’s word is purely taught, there is also the upright and true church, that is supported by the Holy Spirit.”⁷⁷ The church is the *universitas praedestinatorum*, that is, the “totality of the elect.”⁷⁸ Hence,

wherever, therefore, you hear or see this Word preached, believed, confessed, and acted on, there do not doubt that there must be a true *ecclesia sancta catolica*, a Christian, holy people, even though it be small in numbers.⁷⁹

Such language is reminiscent of the remnant.

However, Luther allowed for certain external signs that marked the true visible church. Some of these signs include the right to preach the gospel, purity of doctrines, and rites such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper.⁸⁰ According to Hans K.

⁷⁰Ibid., xiii.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Borkamm, 217.

⁷³Althaus, 342.

⁷⁴LW, 13:88; Cf. Althaus, 343.

⁷⁵Hugh T. Kerr, *A Compend of Luther’s Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 123. In relation to this, Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 7:526, points out that the church was the “spiritual communion of believers scattered throughout the world.”

⁷⁶LW, 39:xiii; Borkamm, 207; and Kerr, 130.

⁷⁷Kerr, 135.

⁷⁸Schaff, 527.

⁷⁹Kerr, 127.

⁸⁰There are seven external signs of a true church. These are (1) preaching the Gospel; (2) purity of doctrines; (3) the rite of baptism; (4) the Lord’s Supper; (5) possession of the Key; (6) the priesthood of all believers; and (7) adherence to the Reformation principles of *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*. For details see Lull, 540-75; Schaff, 528.

LaRondelle, Luther “restricted the true church to a remnant of faithful believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁸¹

The Remnant and Predestination

For Luther, God’s will is irresistible in its sovereignty of purpose and intention. This idea of election or predestination, according to Justo L. Gonzales, was the common “theme of salvation and damnation that permeated the atmosphere in which he lived.”⁸² This influenced Luther’s theology. Indeed, as William M. Landeen has observed, almost everything that Luther “taught, the whole range of his theology from eternity to eternity, and the complete sweep of his thought, religious or secular, stands upon God’s eternal decree of predestination.”⁸³ In 1528, against Zwingli and the Sacramentarians, Luther gave his full view of election:

I herewith reject and condemn as sheer error all doctrines which glory our free will, as diametrically contrary to the help and grace of our savior Jesus Christ. Outside Christ, death and sin are our masters, and the devil is our god and lord; and there is no power or ability, no cleverness or reason with which we can prepare ourselves for righteousness and life or seek after it. On the contrary, we must remain the dupes and captives of sin and the property of the devil to do and to think what pleases them and what is contrary to God and His commandments.⁸⁴

Therefore, one should not be surprised with the Reformer’s belief that the remnant people of God were predestined from eternity.⁸⁵

Because of his views on predestination, Luther believed that salvation was limited only to the elect. For example, in his lecture on Ps 110:1, he asserted that Christ suffered for the elect but not for all people. This was reiterated in his lectures on Romans where, in commenting on 8:28-39, he claimed, “Christ did not die for absolutely all, for He says: ‘This is my blood which is shed for you’ (Luke 22:20) and ‘for many’ (Mark 14:24)—he did not say: for all—‘to the remission of sins’ (Matt 26:28).”⁸⁶

⁸¹LaRondelle, 881.

⁸²Justo L. Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985), 2:16.

⁸³Landeen, 130.

⁸⁴LW, 30:362-63.

⁸⁵In his lectures on Genesis Luther counseled, “One must listen to the Son of God, who was sent into the flesh and appeared to destroy the work of the devil and to make you sure about predestination.” See LW 5:47.

⁸⁶Wilhelm Pauck, ed., *Luther: Lectures on Romans*, Library of Christian Classics, 26 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 15:252.

With regard to texts which infer that salvation is possible for all people (1 Tim 2:4), Luther insisted that these should be “understood only with respect to the elect, as the

Luther repeatedly pointed out that the “remnant only will be saved.”⁸⁷ For him the remnant became the remnant not by exercising free choice or free will but by God’s election of grace. He believed that in Rom 9:29, Paul affirmed what the prophets predicted, namely, that God will let others fall and be cut off, but will protect and preserve the prophesied “remnant.” This remnant was formed “*not by their own will, but they were left and preserved by the grace of God.*”⁸⁸ This saved remnant believed the Gospel. This “tiny remnant knows the sweetness and limitless treasure of the Gospel. Therefore they accepted it and believed it.”⁸⁹ Indeed, “not everyone will believe the Gospel, but only the remnant, *chosen from eternity.*”⁹⁰ For Luther, only people who heard the Gospel and believed it, who were baptized and called, will be saved. This salvation is the result of the “sheer election and immutable will of God.”⁹¹ To be certain, this reflects “the inflexible and firm will of His predestination.”⁹² Hence, Luther could say that it was because of predestination that “the remnant people of God will be saved through the Gospel.”⁹³ Further, in advocating that only the remnant will be saved, Luther claimed,

God will not admit all men to heaven. He will count His own very exactly. Now the human doctrine of free will and of our powers no longer amounts to anything. Our will is unimportant; God’s will and choosing are decisive.⁹⁴

Luther underscored the election of the remnant in his comments on Rom 11:4-7. Concerning verse 4, Luther was convinced that those people whom God

apostle says in 2 Tim 2:10, ‘All for the elect.’” Ibid., 252.

⁸⁷LW, 18:177, 419; 20:150 on Amos 7:4; and LW, 25:85, 421 on Rom 9:27.

⁸⁸LW, 25:86 (emphasis mine).

⁸⁹LW, 20:123.

⁹⁰LW, 17:276 on Mic 5:17,18, delivered 7 April, 1525.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Pauck, 247, 248. Luther argued that “by the power of choice none at all would be saved, but all would perish together.” Ibid., 220. In Romans, Paul uses four universal terms: “all,” “none,” “not,” and “nowhere.” “These are very strong arguments against free choice. These are the clearest evidences that Paul vaunted of the free power of choice.” Ibid., 204.

C. G. Krause, “Call, Calling,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 84, 85, holds a similar opinion. In commenting on the remnant in Rom 11:5-6, he says that it is a “matter of grace and election.” The remnant do not have their own willful volition or free choice to remain loyal to God or to serve Him faithfully. It is purely God’s will for them.

Lull, 217, argues in the same vein. For him it is “evident that in the sight of God free choice, with its will and reason alike, is reckoned as a captive of sin and as damned by it.” Since human beings are utterly incapable of obeying God, then “free choice is nothing but a slave of sin, death, and Satan, not doing and not capable of doing or attempting to do anything but evil.” Ibid., 206.

⁹³LW, 20:19.

⁹⁴LW, 30:6.

kept for Himself are “called the remnant” because they “were left over.” Since “God kept them for Himself” or “He preserves these alone for Himself,”⁹⁵ Luther claimed that this is “a marvelous commendation for His grace and election.”⁹⁶

Verse 5 says that “at the present time there is remnant according to the election of God’s grace.” Luther added that “indeed, it is so in all times, there is a remnant, a remnant only is saved, while the majority is damned.”⁹⁷ This saved remnant is “according to the election of the grace of God, that is, they have been chosen.”⁹⁸ Luther was convinced that God had chosen the remnant and that “He preserves these alone to Himself as a seed for another people.”⁹⁹

Conclusion

Luther’s views concerning the remnant were largely derived from Scripture. Further, his discussion on the descriptions, characteristics, preservation, purpose and mission of the remnant, are closely related to the findings of modern biblical scholarship. But Luther is not explicitly clear whether the remnant is equated with the true church. To be specific, the true church in the end time is reflected in the book of Revelation (12:17; 14:12). This difficulty lies in his use of opposites or contradictions, inconsistencies, and conflicts in expressing his understanding and theological convictions. However, some parts of his theological framework appear to be problematic. For example, his rigid and subjective stance concerning predestination, that God’s will is inscrutable, totally removes the reality of personal decision and human responsibility. This kind of theology seems foreign to the Scriptures. Nevertheless, theological studies on the remnant motif (and related issues) cannot afford to overlook Luther’s contribution to this important subject.

⁹⁵LW, 25:421.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ibid., 423.

⁹⁸Ibid., 96.

⁹⁹Ibid., 396.